

SHRIEKING In Tongues!

He was the voice of Al Cliver in *Zombie Flesh-Eaters*, and he provided English dialogue for many of our favourite Fulci and Argento flicks. Now unsung hero Nick Alexander does some plain speaking about his dubbing career to *Dark Side* interviewer Jason J. Slater...

His name is not familiar to your average moviegoer, but keen followers of Italian exploitation cinema should be aware of Nick Alexander's contribution to many of their favourite dishes of celluloid spaghetti. Whether the main ingredients are bloody gore, action, erotica or even animation, Alexander has had his fingers in all the pizza and pasta pies, dubbing them from their original Italian into a sellable English language version.

One of Alexander's most infamous Italian horror films is Lucio Fulci's *Zombi 2/Zombie Flesh-Eaters*, where he tweaked the screenplay and supplied the English voice for Al Cliver (aka Pier Luigi Conti). However, horror is not the only genre that Alexander specialises in. His name has also graced the works of Dario Argento, Spaghetti Westerns, cop flicks and the slapstick of Terence Hill and Bud Spencer. The following interview should be of interest to those intrigued by the dubbing process. It was conducted in Rome with Alexander and Jane, his rose of a daughter who has also dubbed Tonino Ricci's films. Alexander, a man whose great height matches his impressive physique proved to be a gentleman and a scholar too - and he served up plenty of the chilled beers as we discussed his varied career...

Dark Side: Nick, what was your background before you became successful as one of Rome's leading ADR dubbers?

Nick Alexander: I was born in Gloucestershire, England, brought-up in Sussex and left for Canada at the age of 17 to seek my fame and fortune. I didn't find what I was looking for although I must say I had a great time in Canada and don't regret one minute of it. Montreal was the first big Canadian city I ventured into, and I thought 'Wow - very impressive!'

After Canada, I flew back to England and then Germany and got a job working in Frankfurt as a radio engineer at AFN. I worked there for two years, and in that time managed to write two shows for the station. I also learned a lot about sound composition, which served me a great purpose later on in life.

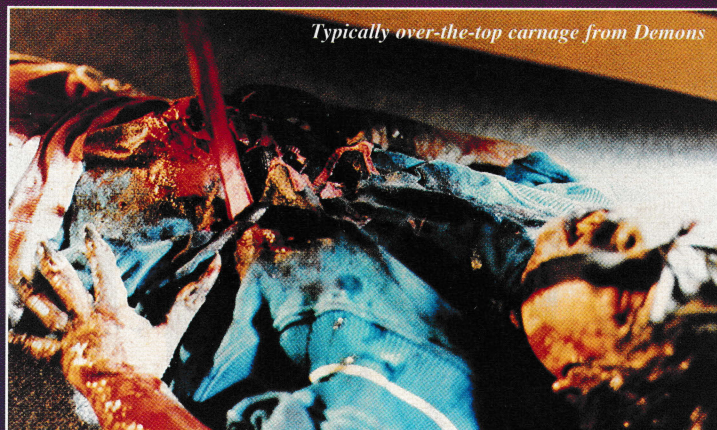
I then found myself in Italy and got a job almost immediately in adapting dialogue for dubbing. It was 1962 and *Cleopatra* was shooting at Cinecittà. Rome was buzzing with energy and was the most amazing place I had ever been to. I had a fringe experience on the set of *Cleopatra*, then found a slot as American dialogue consultant for Geoffrey Coplestone who was adapting and directing the dubbing of Italian movies into English. In those days, Cinecittà was churning out *Maciste* and *Hercules* pictures, the Italian muscleman movies which were very popular all over the world. (note: Coplestone can also be seen as 'Wilkes' in Aristide Massaccesi's *Emanuelle And The Last Cannibals* (1977) and Al Festa's dreadful snoozer *Fatal Frames* 1996).

The *Maciste* epics usually starred an Italian with an American name, or sometimes, the odd American would come over and play the lead role. They were big pictures and some had spectacular action scenes. Also, most were shot in Italian and required adaptations from Italian for dubbing into English.

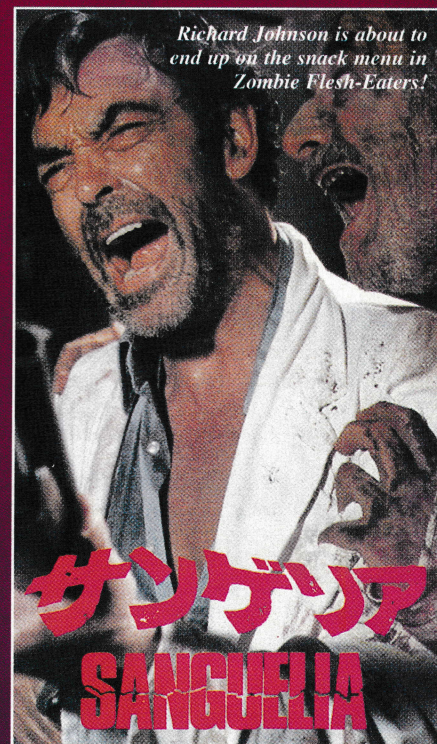
In those days, American buyers were coming to Italy and picking up 50 films at a time because American production was not yet geared to meet TV's voracious appetite. They had the channels but not the product. American International (AIP) set up a dubbing factory in Rome to produce English versions of the Italian movies they had bought. This shows you how the market has changed. Between the 60s and 80s, an Italian film was dubbed and you got yourself a foreign sale almost immediately. In the 60s we had the western, and the 70s brought the James Bond rip-offs. By that time, almost all were shot with translated English dialogue. What has always intrigued me is that the Italian production would often spend months working on a screenplay with the producer, the director and the scriptwriter having their say. Then they'd give it to someone to translate and say, "We need this by the end of the week, we start shooting on Monday!" (laughs). The film would be shot with the direct translation, and even now, they still tend to do that.



Nick Alexander



Typically over-the-top carnage from *Demons*



Richard Johnson is about to end up on the snack menu in *Zombie Flesh-Eaters!*

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DS: So the Italian actors would be reading their lines from an English script?

NA: Yes, the Italian actors would have the English script, while the director would work from his Italian script. Even with the dialogue coach on set, the directors were not that interested in the English language versions. From their point-of-view, their script was in Italian and they were only interested in finishing the film for that market.

DS: Is it important to you as a dubber of Italian cinema to portray the character with a voice that suits it?

NA: I learned early on in my career that the



the screen as far as the performance goes. I would change the dialogue to make the script and continuity flow better, because like I said earlier, the films were shot by directors who couldn't speak English and edited by people who couldn't speak English. Inevitably there were mistakes in the dialogue. In many cases, the same line would be repeated in long shot and close-up. It happened often.

One western that I worked on, a trend-setter at the time, was Giuseppe Colizzi's *God Forgives, I Don't* (1967) which starred Terence Hill and Bud Spencer in their first film together. The film was shot in English, but Colizzi had this thing for tight close-up shots that made it especially hard to re-voice actors speaking fractured English with an acceptable western drawl. Silvana Colizzi, the director's sister, was there with me throughout the dubbing process and she applied purely Italian logic to an American situation. I found myself involved in crazy discussions with her over what a word meant. I remember one scene where the bad guy throws a revolver onto the floor and says "Crawl for it!" But that wasn't good enough for Silvana. You see, in Italian, if you don't crawl for the gun like a snake, it doesn't have enough impact. So, we had major discussions on whether the cowboy should say "Crawl for it" or "Crawl for it like a snake!"

DS: Out of all the Italian westerns that you dubbed, what film was the most satisfying for you personally?

NA: The one that I enjoyed most was *Companeros* (1970) which starred Franco Nero, Tomas Milian and Jack Palance. The movie has fabulous production values and is one of Sergio Corbucci's best. The Italians tried to put every lira they could onto the big screen. Also, with James Bond imitations, the Italians put a lot of money into the visuals in their unique way. *Companeros* was also memorable for me because the first time I saw it, I came out of the dubbing studio and found that we had been snowed-in, very rare in Rome, and had no way to get home.

There are several other westerns that I dubbed which were fun to work on. One was *Chuck Mool* (1970) which was Enzo Barboni's (E.B. Clucher's) first movie as director before going on to tackle the *Trinity* pictures. The film has slapstick fights choreographed in the same style that were so successful in the *Trinity* pictures.

My experience with Enzo G. Castellari's *Keoma* (1976) was interesting. I dubbed the

English language version while the Italian version was being prepared. All I had to go on was the production dialogue and I dubbed the film according to that. When we came to the final mix, I found out that Enzo had added dialogue, here, there and everywhere in the Italian version. It was too late to do the same with the English version and the film was mixed without any dialogue additions. The English language release of *Keoma* is radically different to the Italian version. This is an example of how different the two 'original' versions of the same film could be.

DS: When released theatrically, *Keoma* received excellent reviews from the press. The film is now available in the UK on videocassette in a restored widescreen print to much acclaim from reviewers and fans of the Italian western.

NA: That's amazing! Even though I have been responsible for numerous English versions of Italian films, it's always been very much a backwater of film-making and usually I had no idea what happened to them. It's interesting to note that *Keoma* was a box-office hit at the time when the Spaghetti Western was on its way out. Castellari is a great action director, but like many Italian film-

The drawbacks of 3-D telly demonstrated in Demons!



makers, I think he tends to paint a picture rather than tell a story. Some of the cinematography in *Tuareg The Desert Warrior* is beautiful. Another Castellari film of mine was *The Shark Hunter* (1979) which starred Franco Nero and was shot in Mexico. Did that film go anywhere?

DS: It was a success at the box-office and was a popular rental on video during the early 80s.

NA: *The Shark Hunter* was one of the first films to have close-up shots of man-eating sharks sleeping on the sea bed. Castellari's father, Marino Girolami, was a film-maker of the old school. He supervised everything - camera, sound, make-up and editing. Castellari's own film-making talents are backed up by the excellent on-the-job training he acquired by working for his father. I've dubbed several movies for Castellari including *Lightblast* (1985) which stars Erik Estrada and Enio Girolami who is Castellari's brother.

In 1985, I supervised the English version of Lamberto Bava's *Demons* (1985). *Demons* was a huge success throughout the world, especially in the Asian markets. Dario Argento was the producer. He chose the lead voices for the English version, which was re-voiced from beginning to end, and left the rest up to me. The role of the big black guy, a prolific actor from Naples called Bobby Rhodes, was dubbed by an actor from Chicago called Victor

Beard. The most recent film I worked on with Rhodes is Castellari's *Jonathan of the Bears* (1993) where I supervised Franco Nero's audio track.

DS: One of my favourite westerns that you dubbed is Lucio Fulci's *Four of the Apocalypse* (1975).

NA: Right, starring Tomas Milian and Fabio Testi. I also dubbed Testi's first ever film, directed by Miles Deem who was better known as Demofili Fidani. The interesting thing about the Spaghetti Western was that they created a slew of new leading actors who became international box office names: Giuliano Gemma, Fabio Testi, Franco Nero, Terence Hill and Bud Spencer. Before the advent of the western, Italian productions were hung on the established leading men of the day and it was almost impossible for a young actor to emerge. Even today, the concept of cameo roles or featured supporting roles is almost unknown in Italian film-making. The difference being, of course, that television drama production now offers opportunities for young actors.

DS: You were saying to me earlier that Dario Argento was one of the few directors who took an interest in the English language dubbing...

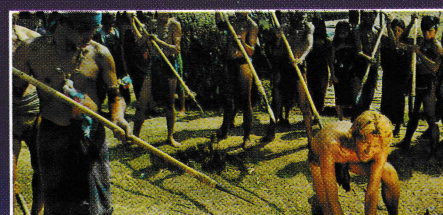
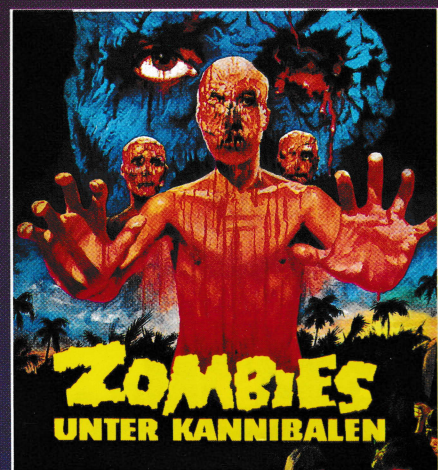
NA: Argento is always interested in the English versions of his films. Apart from his latest feature, *The Phantom of the Opera* (1998), all his films, except for *Two Evil Eyes*, have been dubbed from beginning to end because the production dialogue was unusable. Obviously, the leads usually loop themselves, but not always. In *Deep Red* (1975), Gabriele Lavia was re-voiced. In *Suspria* (1976), Flavio Bucci, Jessica Harper and Alida

Valli did their own looping while others such as Udo Kier were dubbed. Argento has always shot in English and he is one of the few Italian directors who have an international market.

DS: Was Lucio Fulci ever concerned how his films fared when dubbed into English?

NA: I don't think I ever saw Fulci while I was supervising English versions of his films. He simply wasn't interested in the English language versions, whereas Antonio Margheriti is. More than most Italian directors, Margheriti makes movies for the English-speaking markets and puts a lot of time and care into his export versions. I supervised *Yor: The Hunter from the Future* (1983) for him.

DS: An Italian and Turkish co-production, *Yor: The Hunter from the Future* was sold worldwide. I remember the film vividly, when Reb Brown clubs a pterodactyl on its bonce and uses the stiff corpse as a hang-glider!





NA: Yes, it was a Columbia Pictures release, and was probably the last Italian film to have a major theatrical release in America - over 1,500 prints. In one famous scene, Reb Brown yells, "It will make you dead!" The producers insisted I re-voice him. Later, I heard that Brown objected. I often wonder if the available print is in his own voice or the dubbed one.

DS: When it comes to dubbing films, have you ever made the decision to put more creative energy into a good film than a bad one? For example, would you work just as hard on an Al Festa film as a Dario Argento one?

NA: It's my job to reproduce the movie in English. It doesn't matter if the film is dreadful, I must repeat the performances of the characters if at all possible, or if necessary, *give them* a performance! Usually, the movie suffers because the actors are struggling to act in English and are not masters of what they're saying. The trick is to try and make them look and appear as if they're speaking normally. It's a challenge and it's anonymous. If successful, the film is accepted as the original version. Once completed, the film leaves the studio and it's goodbye - and no news is good news. Whatever the film may be like, it's imperative to give it your best shot, because you never know where it will go.

Zombie Flesh-Eaters is an example. The film wasn't brilliant, but it did have the foreign cast that kept it afloat. As often happened, I received the work print and the production soundtrack and was required to deliver the complete English version in

less than two weeks, probably because it had to be shown at the Cannes Film Market or Mifed. The leads came and looped themselves, the rest of the cast were re-voiced. The job was delivered on schedule, and it was on to the next one. I believe Ian McCulloch was bemused when he heard that *Zombie Flesh-Eaters* had become a cult film - so am I! (laughs).

DS: When you first saw *Zombie Flesh-Eaters*, were you shocked with the visual violence, such as Olga Karlatos' juicy eyeball piercing?

NA: No, I first saw the film without music and effects and that tends to tone down the horror impact a lot. I was listening to the guide track and was only interested in the dialogue, not what was happening on the screen. My job was to try and make the English language version presentable, and the horror side never applied.

DS: Did you find it odd to see Richard Johnson, an actor of international recognition, starring in such a gruesome bloodbath?

NA: He had already starred in the Ovidio Assonitis picture *Beyond The Door/Chi Sei?* (1974) as well as in other Italian movies. Johnson had no problem with what he was doing in Italy.

DS: I'm pleased to have finally discovered who supplied Al Cliver's English dubbed voice. It's you! (laughs)

NA: Yes, I was Al Cliver (real name Pier Luigi Conti) because it was convenient. I do not have a stereotypical dubbing actor's voice, and the intention was to make Cliver, who was surrounded by actors dubbing themselves, as credible as possible. It was my decision and it saved a lot of time. To find out 15 years later that that my voice has contributed to making Al Cliver an international cult movie star is just so bizarre. I dubbed him in several films after that, but never met him in person.

DS: Fulci always claimed that *The Black Cat* (1981) was a rush job and he only directed the film to keep himself busy. Did you find this to be the case?

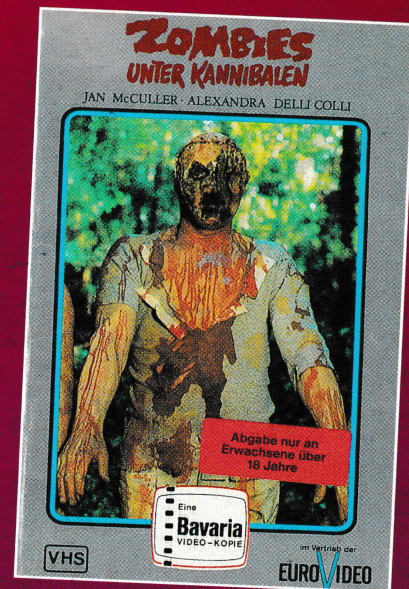
NA: Once again, the production sound was only a guide track and the English version is dubbed from beginning to end. Patrick Magee dubbed himself, of course. When he finished shooting, he had two days left in his contract. The film wasn't cut yet, but to avoid having to bring him back, the production insisted he dub the rushes of his scenes, meaning the same lines four or five times. After that, his track gathered dust on a rack for a couple of months until I received the final cut and dubbed the rest of it. Mimsy Farmer and David Warbeck also looped themselves. It was such a pity to hear about Warbeck's death. He was a great guy and worked extensively in Italian cinema.

DS: David enjoyed working in Italian cinema immensely and had the greatest respect for his directors such as Fulci and Umberto Lenzi. David even had kind words for Bruno Mattei who has earned himself a reputation for making z-grade movies.

NA: Don't let Bruno hear you say that! (laughs). Bruno Mattei is still going strong. He even manages to find independent financing for his low budget productions, which is very unusual in Italy. If you're not backed by Mediaset or Rai, it's very difficult to put a production together.

DS: Are you surprised that Fulci's *Zombie Flesh-Eaters* and *The Beyond* have made such a dramatic and popular comeback on laserdisc and DVD?

NA: It's as if the graphic Italian horror film has become as popular in the 90s as they were in the early 80s. I think it's great and it gives me a great deal of job satisfaction. But, yes, it's surprising. Although these films were Italian productions, they were never considered 'real' Italian movies as they were commercial ventures with no cultural back-

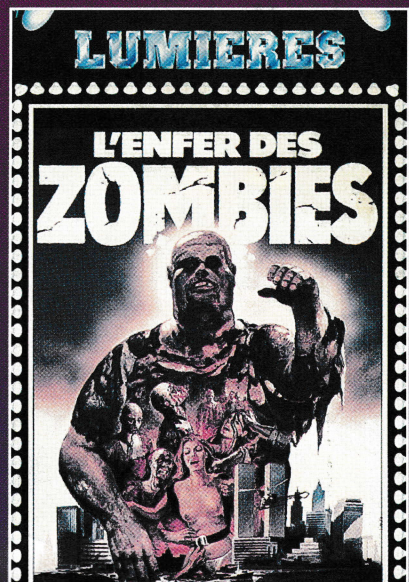


ground. Like all of us who dubbed in those days, I was just doing my job and thanking God that there were enough films that needed my services so that I could earn a living in Rome. It never occurred to any of us that some of these movies would gain cult value or have a superior quality that was going to last. I'm delighted Lucio Fulci has become such an important cult director in the same league as Dario Argento.

DS: Argento achieved international recognition with *The Bird With The Crystal Plumage* (1969)...

NA: The first Argento film for which I supervised the dubbing was *Four Flies on Grey Velvet*. I think Argento belongs to the select club of Italian directors who have influenced international film-making. His style has been seen in the films of various mainstream Hollywood directors such as Brian De Palma. *Flatliners* has scenes that are so Dario Argento. His use of colour, music, camera angles and editing have all been trend setting. I believe the soundtrack of *Suspiria* that crashed its way from beginning to end was a first in movie history.

Today, major international stars are seldom seen in Italian movies. I supervised Henry Fonda's looping in Carlo Lizani's *The Last Days of Mussolini* (1974) - that also starred Rod Steiger as Mussolini. Because of its high Fascist profile, the film was a political hot potato. Fonda was leaving the next day and we were working late. At a certain point the studio received an anonymous tip-off that there was a bomb in the building that would go off at 10 p.m. The police search found no bomb, but they said we should vacate the building no later than 9:30 p.m. and we knew that would leave us with another 20 loops to complete. And so, at 9:30 p.m. everyone cleared the building and Fonda went back to his



hotel. At 10:03, the crew was complaining that the bomb hadn't gone off, and at 10:05 we were back in the recording room. Curiously, in Italy, where many things are notoriously haphazard, a bomb was expected to go off on time! If it's late it won't happen! Of course, there was no bomb and Fonda came back, unruffled, at 10:30 p.m. to finish the job.

DS: Are there any other dubbers who work in Rome translating Italian films for English-language markets?

NA: There is a nucleus of people that dub in Italy. The dubbing community has changed a lot since I first started. There's Frank Von Kuegelgen who worked on Ruggero Deodato's *Cut And Run* (1985), Gene Luotto, John Gayford and myself who began dubbing over a generation ago. The bottom fell out of dubbing in Rome some three years ago when the Italians stopped making films for the English-speaking market. For years, it has been extremely difficult for people to make a good living from dubbing.

I have been lucky in that I learned the business from the bottom-upwards, so that my skills are fairly widespread. I ventured into production dialogue editing in the early 80s and that widened my employment horizon. In those days, many Italian films were being shot with viable production sound so that they could seriously compete with American mainstream pictures. Of course, this required sound editors that could speak English. And in those days, Mike Billingsley was the only person who could fit the bill. As a sound editor, Mike's CV is of great esteem with movies such as Bertolucci's *1900* and *Last Tango In Paris*, Liliana Cavani's *The Night Porter* and many others.

My first dialogue editing job was Terence Hill's *Don Camillo*. For years, English was separate from the entire Italian post-production process and it's been a great school. I've dubbed films in many different countries and learning my trade in Italy has prepared me for just about anything.

The work situation is different now - if you're not working in dubbing, you're doing something else. When dubbing fell away, I worked in translation in a big way. There is always a demand to dub documentaries, industrials and publicity. There are not many of us working on the dubbing scene and there is usually enough work in English to go round. Dubbing-actors have suffered, many have gone elsewhere, but I've rarely had a serious problem finding voices. ARA, the English language dubbing association in Rome, represents

around 40 American and English voices, many top level. At the moment, I am working in cartoons and the local talent is more than sufficient for my needs.

DS: When you did use dubbing actors for Italian movies during the 80s for example, would you always use a specific crew?

NA: I have always been in the favour of getting as many new people into the business as possible. The dubbing-actors issue is interesting. Many actors have difficulty relating to another actor on the screen. Dubbing requires giving a performance in synch using somebody else's timing and that's not easy. It's a skill that is not taught in acting school. Some actors seem to be able to do it intuitively, while others tend to fight it. The trick is to identify with the performance on the screen and not impose yourself on it. It's a talent and when someone comes along who has it, naturally I'm delighted to use them.

DS: I couldn't help flicking through Argento's screenplay for *The Phantom Of The Opera*, which is half-hidden amongst newspapers on your coffee table. What are your thoughts on this work after Argento's disastrous *Trauma* (1993) and *The Stendhal Syndrome* (1996)?

NA: *The Phantom of the Opera* is an established tale. Dario is obviously intrigued with the opera aspect and with Julian Sands in the lead role it promises to be vintage Argento. Asia also gives a surprisingly strong performance. She acts well in English and seems quite at home with the role.

DS: You also dubbed the first Italian cannibal film, Umberto Lenzi's *Deep River Savages*...

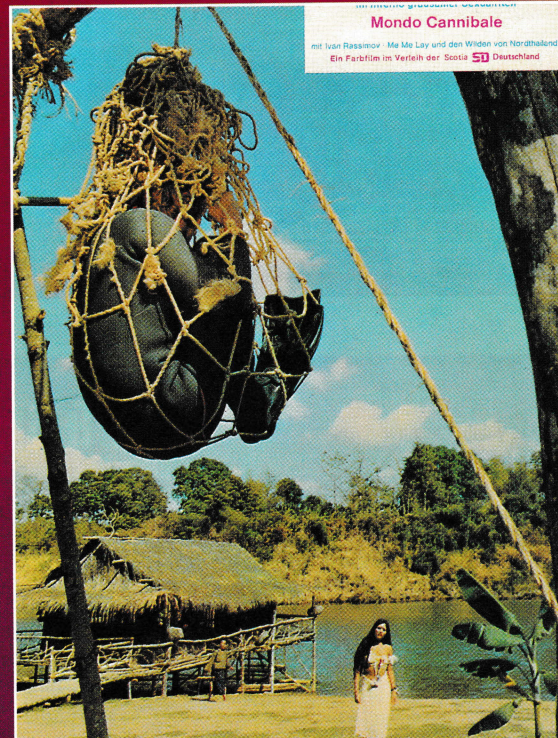
NA: Like Antonio Margheriti, Lenzi has always catered to the English-speaking market, and *Deep River Savages* is a good example. As far as 'firsts' are concerned, I was the dialogue editor on Alejandro Jodorowsky's *Santa Sangre* (1989), his first film shot in English. Blanca Guerra and Jodorowsky's sons came to dub themselves and the supporting cast was re-voiced. Claudio Argento, Dario's brother was the producer.

The reason why these Italian films aren't being made any more is because the huge American film chains such as Miramax now dictate what can be made around the globe. Working in Italy has given me the opportunity to work with an incredible range of movies. Some have made an impact in their own way, some have even been trend setters. However, American domination in movie and TV production has forced the Italian industry to fall back on provincial stories that cannot compete in the English speaking market. I believe the Italian film industry has got to gain confidence in itself, rely less on domestic TV financing and broaden its horizons.

Another problem is the attitude to post-production in Italy. For most Italian producers, the film ends on the last day of principal photography. From then on it's a question of cost-cutting and deferred payments that tends to restrict investment in post production facilities, and consequently the quality of the end product suffers.

DS: What ever happened to Margheriti's *Virtual Weapon*, that stars Terence Hill and Marvellous Marvin Hagler? Filmexport Group retitled the film as *Dead And Alive*, but it still has to be sold.

NA: Really? I have no idea what's happened. The film was shot completely in Miami and has a few good moments. Maybe it's just the end of a trend. Some movies go, others don't, and often it's hard to understand why. I dubbed a film called *Black Emanuelle* (1975) that stars Laura Gemser and Angelo Infanti, directed by Adalberto Albertini. Even though it was a spin-off of the successful



Mondo Cannibale

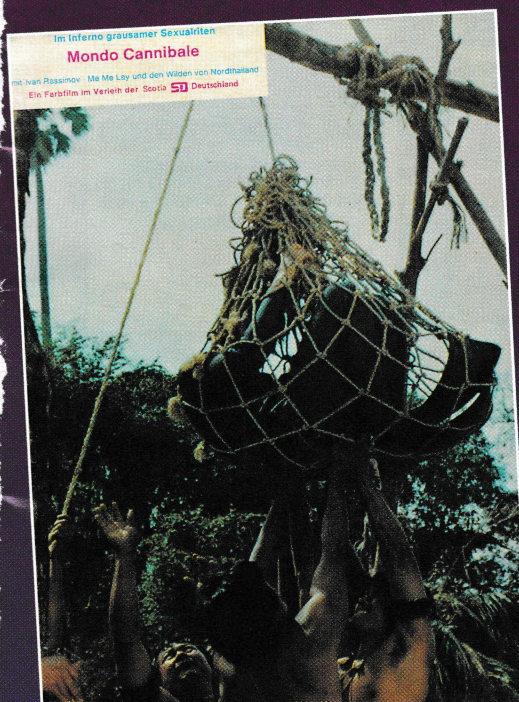
mit Ivan Rassimov, Me Me Lay und den Wilden von Norditalien
Ein Farbfilm im Verleih der Scala 50 Deutschland

French Emmanuelle, it had a magic of its own and did well everywhere. It also sparked a very successful craze with Gemser as lead actress. Once again, the film was revoiced from beginning to end - there were no original voices in the English language release.

After *Black Emanuelle*, I dubbed *Black Emanuelle 2* (1976) and then *Emanuelle And The White Slave Trade* when the trend was on the wane. In the same vein, years ago, I dubbed a film called *Gangster Eddie* (1967), directed by Alfio Caltabiano, about prohibition in Chicago during the 20s. It was well shot and directed and it didn't do any business in Italy. Later, the director received an award from the lab because they struck more prints of the export version than any other film that year.

DS: What does the future hold for Nick Alexander in Rome?

NA: Well, I hope that the English language industry keeps on going! (laughs). I suspect there will be a major comeback for English dubbing to supply outlets all over the world that are currently repeating the same material year after year. Perhaps the day will come when classic channels will screen the repeats and leave the other channels for new material. It may not be like the boom years of the 60s, but there must come a time when demand for product becomes so great that dubbed material will once again become viable. If it does, I hope we in Rome can be a part of it.



Im Inferno grausamer Sexuritten
Mondo Cannibale

mit Ivan Rassimov, Me Me Lay und den Wilden von Norditalien
Ein Farbfilm im Verleih der Scala 50 Deutschland

